

Methods for Identifying Causes of Toxicity in Whole-Sediments

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ABSTRACT

Whole-sediment toxicity identification and evaluation (WS-TIE) is a relatively new approach for assessing the cause of toxic effects to benthic organisms in sediments. Akin to aqueous TIE methods, the premise of the WS-TIE method is that the chemical toxicant(s) responsible for observed effects can be identified through a series of treatments that are designed to reduce the bioavailability and, thus, toxicity of key contaminant classes. While standardised WS-TIE methods have been developed for a range of contaminants (US EPA, 2007), many contaminated sediments exist for which the methods can not adequately identify the cause(s) of toxicity. Standard WS-TIE methods primarily manipulate the toxicity of dissolved contaminants, but do not address effects that may occur via dietary exposure to chemical contaminants.

The research presented herein, recognises that standard WS-TIE methods do not address all of the major contaminant exposure pathways for some benthic organisms. New WS-TIE methods to address toxic effects of those contaminants acting via dietary exposure routes were developed as a part of this research. The new methods were specifically designed for whole-sediment toxicity tests using the epibenthic amphipod *M. plumulosa*; a deposit feeding species that can display acute toxicity from dietary exposure to contaminated sediments (Simpson and King, 2005; Mann and Hyne, 2008; Spadaro *et al.*, 2008). WS-TIE methods using the microalgae *Entomoneis cf punctulata* were also developed to compliment results achieved using *Melita plumulosa* in sediment quality assessments.

New WS-TIE treatments were developed to modify the organism's exposure to sediment contaminants by modifying the bioaccessibility of particulate-associated contaminants (PACs) to *M. plumulosa*. The two new techniques were principally employed to achieve this goal. Firstly, a mesh exposure chamber (MEC) was developed that effectively prevented *M. plumulosa* from ingesting sediments, but did not modify the exposure to dissolved contaminants in the overlying water. Secondly, resins deployed at the sediment surface, metal chelating resin-top (MCR-Top) or carbonaceous adsorbent resin-top (CAR-Top) to both remove from the dissolved phase, metals and organic contaminants, respectively. It was demonstrated that sediment nutrition had a large influence on the outcome of whole-sediments toxicity tests, and a food addition (FOOD) treatment was incorporated into the suite of WS-TIE treatments to help differentiate between the natural effects caused by nutritionally-poor sediments and the toxic effects of dietary exposure to contaminants.

For the amphipod *M. plumulosa*, the standard WS-TIE methods were demonstrated to be ineffective for reducing, or eliminating, the toxicity of a range of sediments. For ~80% of the sediments investigated, >50% of the toxicity to *M. plumulosa* was unaccounted for using standard WS-TIE methods. By applying the new WS-TIE treatments in combination with the standard WS-TIE methods, >90% of toxicity could be identified for each of the sediments. For almost half these sediments, PACs were considered to have significantly contributed to toxicity (50-100%). Additionally, new WS-TIE treatments were able to improve the identification of dissolved metals and hydrophobic organic contaminants (HOCs), when compared to standard WS-TIE methods alone. The application of both standard and new WS-TIE methods identified dissolved metals and HOCs as the chief causes of toxicity to *M. plumulosa* in ten sediments containing a wide range of contaminants.

Apparent toxicity due to inadequate sediment nutrition was demonstrated to confound the interpretation of the WS-TIE studies. It was found to be beneficial to apply a 'minimal' feeding regime, comprising approximately 0.06 mg fish-food per amphipod on days 3 and 7 of 10-d toxicity tests, to ensure that a lack of nutrition did not cause toxic effects in sediments containing low nutritional value (e.g. sandy sediments with low amount of organic matter). Sediments that contained $\geq 10\%$ fine particles (silt, $< 63 \mu\text{m}$) and $> 2\%$ organic carbon were determined to have adequate nutrition and FOOD treatments were unnecessary. The addition of the FOOD treatment in WS-TIEs was generally a useful tool for discerning poor nutrition from toxicity to *M. plumulosa*. However, in applying a FOOD treatment to WS-TIEs, it was observed that selective feeding could mask the toxic effects of some contaminants, namely hydrophobic organic chemicals. Therefore, the FOOD treatment was used cautiously to discern poor nutrition from toxicity using additional lines-of evidence, such as knowledge of changes to the organism's sensitivity to contaminants and contaminant concentration-effect relationships.

For the microalgae, *E. cf punctulata*, for which the only significant contaminant exposure pathway is believed to be the passive diffusion of dissolved contaminants or their free ions across the cell surface, a rapid WS-TIE method based on FDA fluorescence inhibition in *E. cf punctulata* using flow cytometry was developed for dissolved metals (metal chelating resin, MCR^x, treatment), organic contaminants (carbonaceous adsorbent resin, CAR, treatment), and ammonia (zeolite, ZEO,

treatment). These treatments were effective for reducing the toxicity of contaminants in both natural -contaminated and spiked-sediments.

The identification of all the chemical toxicants within contaminated sediments was generally found to be very difficult. The variability between replicates was usually high, ranging from 0-19% (amphipod survival). The use of a multiple lines-of-evidence approach with WS-TIE is recommended for sediments containing a wide variety of chemical contaminants. The lines-of-evidence used to enhance the understanding of toxicants in the sediments of this study included: (i) chemical analyses of the test waters, (ii) analyses of physical/chemical properties of the sediment (i.e. total particulate metals and acid extractable metals, organic contaminants, sediment fractionation, total organic carbon, etc), (iii) understanding of the organisms contaminant-exposure pathways, (iv) quantifying the role of nutrition to sediment toxicity (i.e. silt and TOC content), (v) measuring the effects of added food on organism sensitivity, contaminant bioavailability, feeding behaviour or physiology (i.e. depuration and detoxification processes), and (vi) understanding the physiology and behaviour of the organism, and the factors that may have significant effects.

In order to strengthen the lines-of-evidence for interpreting WS-TIE data, contaminant concentration-effect relationships were determined for contaminants often observed in sediments. For *M. plumulosa*, the 10-d EC₅₀ for dissolved un-ionised ammonia, copper, and zinc were 980, 75, and 220 µg/L, respectively. The IC₅₀ values for dissolved copper and zinc to *E. cf. punctulata* were 13 µg/L and 1,500 µg/L, respectively. The IC_x and EC_x values were used to determine the specific contaminant(s) causing toxicity and/or the contribution of these contaminants to observed toxic effects in sediments containing a mixture of contaminants.

The effect of contaminants on the growth of *M. plumulosa*, and the ability of WS-TIE methods to determine which stressors were the causes of any growth effects, was assessed. Results from the natural-contaminated sediments and the chemical-spiked sediments demonstrated that the growth, measured as amphipod size (area), was a more sensitive indicator of toxicity than acute survival. However, WS-TIE methods were far less effective for identifying toxicity using amphipod growth than survival. Difficulties with applying a growth toxicity indicator using *M. plumulosa* arose from the significant influence of sediments physico-chemical properties, storage and handling of sediment and feeding regime during whole-sediment toxicity tests.

New WS-TIE methods and additional lines-of-evidence described in this research provide a more comprehensive approach for sediment quality assessment, specifically for those organisms exposed to sediment-associated contaminants via their diet. However, further research is required to enhance techniques for delineating toxicity due to dissolved and particulate-associated toxicity, and identifying specific classes of PACs. Due to the variability associated with whole-sediment toxicity tests, the use of multiple lines-of-evidence is essential for WS-TIE procedures.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW.....	1
1.1. Physical and Chemical Factors of Sediments Controlling Contaminant Bioavailability and Toxicity	3
1.1.1. Particle size	3
1.1.2. Organic matter	4
1.1.3. Acid volatile sulfide.....	5
1.1.4. Iron and manganese oxyhydroxides (MeOOH).....	6
1.1.5. Sediment pH and redox potential.....	7
1.2. Biological Factors Controlling Toxicity	8
1.3. Toxicity Identification Methods.....	11
1.3.1. Toxicity identification methods for freshwater samples.....	11
1.3.2. Toxicity identification methods for marine/estuarine samples	15
1.3.3. Toxicity identification methods for sediments	17
1.4. Effects-Directed Analysis – Alternative Methods for Identifying Toxicity Associated with Sediments	29
1.5. Current Limitations of Whole-Sediment Toxicity Identification Methods	32
1.6. Thesis Aims and Outline	34
CHAPTER 2 GENERAL MATERIALS AND METHODS	37
2.1. Sediment Collection	37
2.1.1. Site description	37
2.1.2. Sediment collection.....	37
2.2. Analytical Methods	38
2.2.1. General physico-chemical measurements.....	38
2.2.2. Grain size analysis	38
2.2.3. Water content.....	39
2.2.4. Extraction of pore water	39
2.2.5. Organic carbon.....	39
2.2.6. General cleaning	40
2.2.7. Reagents.....	40
2.2.8. Analysis of metals by inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrophotometry	41
2.2.9. Analysis of ammonia	41
2.2.10. Analysis of organic chemicals	42
2.2.11. Determination of acid extractable metals.....	42
2.2.12. Determination of total particulate metals.....	42
2.2.13. Preparation of spiked-sediments	43
2.3. Toxicity Testing Procedures.....	44
2.3.1. Acute <i>Melita plumulosa</i> toxicity tests.....	44
2.3.2. FDA fluorescence inhibition bioassays using <i>Entomoneis cf punctulata</i>	48
CHAPTER 3 DEVELOPMENT OF WHOLE-SEDIMENT TOXICITY IDENTIFICATION AND EVALUATION (TIE) STUDIES WITH THE AMPHIPOD <i>MELITA PLUMULOSA</i>: A LINES-OF-EVIDENCE APPROACH	53
3.1. Introduction.....	54
3.2. Specific Objectives	56
3.3. Materials and Methods.....	56

3.3.1. Toxicity tests.....	56
3.3.2. Resin adsorption studies	59
3.3.3. Test sediments.....	61
3.3.4. Standard WS-TIE approach	62
3.3.5. New WS-TIE treatments using EDTA	65
3.4. Results.....	66
3.4.1. Sensitivity of <i>M. plumulosa</i> to dissolved ammonia, zinc and EDTA	66
3.4.2. Resin adsorption/ specificity studies.....	71
3.4.3. Sensitivity of <i>M. plumulosa</i> to standard WS-TIE treatments	77
3.4.4. Sensitivity of <i>M. plumulosa</i> to new WS-TIE treatments	82
3.4.5. Influence of added food on amphipod survival and size	83
3.5. Discussion	86
3.5.1. Sensitivity of <i>M. plumulosa</i> to dissolved ammonia, zinc and EDTA	86
3.5.2. Resin adsorption/ specificity studies.....	89
3.5.3. Sensitivity of <i>M. plumulosa</i> to standard WS-TIE treatments	92
3.5.4. Sensitivity of <i>M. plumulosa</i> to new WS-TIE treatments	95
3.5.5. Influence of added food on amphipod survival and size	97
3.6. Conclusions.....	99
CHAPTER 4 APPLICATION OF WHOLE-SEDIMENT TIE METHODS USING THE AMPHIPOD <i>MELITA PLUMULOSA</i>: MULTIPLE CONTAMINANT EXPOSURE PATHWAYS APPROACH	100
4.1. Introduction.....	101
4.2. Specific Objectives	102
4.3. Materials and Methods.....	103
4.3.1. Test sediments.....	103
4.3.2. Whole-sediment toxicity tests.....	104
4.3.3. Standard WS-TIE approach	104
4.3.4. New WS-TIE approach.....	104
4.4. Results.....	107
4.4.1. Sediment A (<i>Derwent River</i>)	107
4.4.2. Sediment B (<i>Hen and Chicken Bay</i>)	110
4.4.3. Sediment C (<i>Careel Bay</i>)	113
4.4.4. Sediment D (<i>Urban Marina</i>)	116
4.4.5. Sediment E (<i>Careel Bay</i>)	124
4.4.6. Sediment F (<i>Urban Marina</i>)	129
4.4.7. Sediments G, H & I – (<i>Duck Creek</i>)	133
4.4.8. Improvement of mesh exposure chamber (MEC) treatments	145
4.5. Discussion	146
4.5.1. Effectiveness of standard WS-TIE methods for identifying toxicity in contaminated sediments to <i>M. plumulosa</i>	146
4.5.2. New WS-TIE treatments to discern toxicity via dissolved and dietary pathways	149
4.5.3. Role and importance of nutrition in whole-sediment toxicity tests	157
4.5.4. Primary causes of toxicity to <i>M. plumulosa</i> in marine sediments.....	161
4.6. Conclusions.....	163
CHAPTER 5 SELECTION AND APPLICATION OF WS-TIE METHODS USING THE MICROALGA <i>ENTOMONEIS CF PUNCTULATA</i>: A DISSOLVED EXPOSURE PATHWAY APPROACH	165
5.1. Introduction.....	166

5.2. Specific Objectives	167
5.3. Materials and Methods.....	168
5.3.1. Test sediments.....	168
5.3.2. Whole-sediment toxicity tests.....	168
5.3.3. Whole-sediment TIE methods	169
5.3.4. Sensitivity of <i>E. cf punctulata</i> bioassays to metals (water-only exposures)...	170
5.3.5. Statistical analysis.....	171
5.4. Results.....	172
5.4.1. Sensitivity of <i>E. cf punctulata</i> to dissolved contaminants	172
5.4.2. Effect of WS-TIE treatments on esterase activity in <i>E. cf punctulata</i>	172
5.4.3. Sediment screening	173
5.4.4. Efficacy of treatments for identifying organic contaminants in whole-sediment toxicity tests.....	177
5.4.5. Efficacy of treatments for identifying metals contaminants in whole-sediment toxicity tests.....	178
5.5. Discussion	182
5.5.1. Sensitivity of <i>E. cf punctulata</i> to dissolved metal contaminants	182
5.5.2. Effect of TIE treatments on esterase activity in <i>E. cf punctulata</i>	183
5.5.3. Whole-sediment toxicity screening.....	184
5.5.4. Efficacy of treatments for identifying organic contaminants in whole-sediment toxicity tests.....	184
5.5.5. Efficacy of treatments for identifying metal contaminants in whole-sediment toxicity tests.....	186
5.5.6. Efficacy of treatments for reducing ammonia in whole-sediment toxicity tests	188
5.6. Conclusions.....	188
 CHAPTER 6 DEVELOPMENT OF A SUB-LETHAL TOXICITY INDICATOR FOR WHOLE-SEDIMENT TOXICITY TESTS WITH THE AMPHIPOD <i>MELITA PLUMULOSA</i>.....	
6.1. Introduction.....	191
6.2. Specific Objectives	192
6.3. Materials and Methods.....	192
6.3.1. Sub-lethal endpoint for <i>M. plumulosa</i>	192
6.3.2. Data analysis	192
6.3.3. Sizing of amphipods	193
6.3.4. Factors affecting amphipod size in whole-sediment toxicity tests.....	194
6.3.5. Toxicity tests.....	194
6.3.6. Amphipod age versus size	195
6.4. Results.....	195
6.4.1. Calibration of image analysis.....	195
6.4.2. Amphipod age versus size	196
6.4.3. Factors affecting amphipod size in whole-sediment toxicity tests.....	197
6.4.4. Application of a growth indicator to WS-TIE studies	209
6.5. Discussion	219
6.5.1. Imaging analysis technique for measuring amphipod growth	220
6.5.2. Amphipod age versus size	220
6.5.3. Factors affecting amphipod size in whole-sediment toxicity tests.....	221
6.5.4. Application of a growth indicator in WS-TIE studies	225
6.6. Conclusions.....	228
 CHAPTER 7 GENERAL DISCUSSION.....	
	229

7.1. Whole-Sediment TIE Methods for Identifying Causality in Whole-Sediment Toxicity Tests Using the Amphipod <i>M. plumulosa</i>	230
7.1.1. Role of food in whole-sediment toxicity tests	234
7.1.2. Proposed model for conducting WS-TIE studies using <i>M. plumulosa</i>	236
7.2. Whole-Sediment TIE Methods for Identifying Causality in Whole-Sediment Toxicity Tests Using the Marine alga <i>Entomoneis cf punctulata</i>	240
7.2.1. Proposed model for conducting WS-TIE studies using <i>E cf punctulata</i>	243
7.3. Alternative Toxicity Endpoints/Indicators for WS-TIE Studies Using <i>M. plumulosa</i>	246
7.4. Limitations of WS-TIE Methods	248
7.5. Conclusions	249
7.6. Future Work/Application of WS-TIE Methods	250
 REFERENCES	 252
 GLOSSARY OF TERMS	 268
 APPENDICES	 A1-I

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Schematic of effects-directed analysis (EDA) for complex mixtures (Brack, 2003)	30
Figure 2.1 An adult female amphipod of the species <i>M. plumulosa</i> .	44
Figure 2.2 The set-up of whole-sediment toxicity tests with <i>M. plumulosa</i> in (a) the test beakers and (b) a constant environmental chamber.	46
Figure 2.3 The benthic alga <i>Entomoneis cf punctulata</i> .	49
Figure 2.4 Flow cytometric histogram showing shifts in esterase activity (FL1 fluorescence versus cell count) of <i>E. cf. punctulata</i> after a 24-h exposure to copper (a) 0 µg/L, 4% S1; (b) 85 µg/L, 58% in S1; (c) 250 µg/L, 78% in S1 (Adams and Stauber, 2004).	51
Figure 3.1 ◇ WS-TIE materials (a) ResinTech SIR300™, (b) PCC (< 45 µm), (c) GCC (≥ 600 µm), (d) Amberlite XAD2®, (e) Ambersorb 572®, and (f) ResinTech SIR600™, investigated for use in whole-sediment toxicity tests.	63
Figure 3.2 (a) 180 µm and (b) 500 µm mesh funnels used for draining resins.	63
Figure 3.3 Relationship between (a) total ammonia, NH ₃ -N, and (b) un-ionised ammonia, NH ₃ , concentrations in the overlying water and pore water of ammonia-spiked sediments in 10-d toxicity tests	67
Figure 3.4 Concentration-effects curves for <i>M. plumulosa</i> exposed to (a) total ammonia, NH ₃ -N, in the overlying water, (b) total ammonia, NH ₃ -N, in the pore water, (c) un-ionised ammonia, NH ₃ , in the overlying water and, (d) un-ionised ammonia, NH ₃ , in the pore water of ammonia-spiked sediments.	68
Figure 3.5 Concentration-effects relationship between <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival and the concentration of dissolved zinc in 10-d water only toxicity tests.	69
Figure 3.6 Concentration-effects relationships between 4-d survival of the amphipod <i>M. plumulosa</i> to (a) EDTA and (b) EDTA-pH 8 adjusted.	70
Figure 3.7 Loss of dissolved metals manganese (◆), nickel (□), copper (▲), zinc (×), cadmium (✖), cobalt (+), silver (○) and arsenic (–) (% of 0 h blank) over 96 h in the control treatment.	71
Figure 3.8 Adsorption (% of control treatment) of (a) manganese, (b) nickel, (c) copper, (d) zinc, (e) cadmium, (f) cobalt, (g) silver and (h) arsenic onto SIR300™ (+), Chelex 100® (Δ), Amberlite XAD2® (■), Ambersorb 572® (◇), PCC (–), CC (✖), and SIR600™ (○) over 96 h.	75
Figure 3.9 Effect of (a) increasing amounts of PCC (< 45µm), (b) increasing amounts of GCC (~600 µm), and (c) CC of varying particle size (63-180 µm, 180-250 µm, 250-500 µm), on the 10-d survival of the amphipod <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. Asterisks (*) denotes a statistically significant (p<0.05) difference to control treatment.	79
Figure 3.10 The effect of 15% and 25% CC (63-160 µm), CAR (Amberlite XAD-2®) and CAR (Ambersorb 572®) treatments on the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> exposed to control sediment (■), and PAH contaminated sediment (□) containing hydrophobic organic toxicants. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. Asterisks (*) denote a statistically significant (p<0.05) difference to the baseline treatment.	80
Figure 3.11 The 10-d whole sediment toxicity of <i>M. plumulosa</i> exposed to baseline (■) and EDTA treatments (□) of control and copper-spiked sediments in tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4.	83
Figure 3.12 Effect of nutrition added to sand in the form of silt (0 to 95%) on the 10-d survival (■-bar) and size (◇-line) of juvenile <i>M. plumulosa</i> in whole-sediment toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4 (for 0%, 0.1%, 0.95%, 4.8%, 9.5%, 38%, 57%, 67%, 76%, 86%), n = 8 (for 48% and 95%) . Uppercase letters (A, B, C,	

D) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod survival between treatments. Lowercase letters (a, b, c) denote a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod size between treatments.	84
Figure 3.13 Effect of feeding on the 10-d survival (■-bar) and size (◇-line) of juvenile <i>M. plumulosa</i> exposed to sand in whole-sediment toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, $n = 4$. Uppercase letters (A, B, C, D) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod survival between treatments. Lowercase letters (a, b, c) denote a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod size between treatments.	85
Figure 3.14 Effect of feeding on the 10-d survival and size of juvenile <i>M. plumulosa</i> exposed to Bonnet Bay, Grays Point and Boronia Park control sediments in whole-sediment toxicity tests. BB = Bonnet Bay, GP = Grays Point and BP = Boronia Park. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, $n = 4$. Upper case letters (A, B, C) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod survival between treatments. Lowercase letters (a, b, c) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod size between treatments.	86
Figure 4.1 Mesh exposure chamber (MEC) treatment set-up in whole-sediment toxicity tests with <i>M. plumulosa</i>	106
Figure 4.2 Metal Chelating Resin-Top (MCR-Top) treatment in whole-sediment toxicity tests with <i>M. plumulosa</i>	106
Figure 4.3 Results from WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and Sediment A (■) using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, $n = 4$. Asterisks (*) denotes a significant ($p < 0.05$) difference to baseline sediment.	110
Figure 4.4 Suspect toxicants identified in Sediment A using standard WS-TIE methods.	110
Figure 4.5 Results from WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and Sediment B (■) using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, $n = 4$	112
Figure 4.6 Results from WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and Sediment C (■) using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, $n = 4$. * denotes a significant ($p < 0.05$) difference to baseline sediment. No bars present for baseline, ZEO and food treatments of Sediment C due to no <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival.	115
Figure 4.7 Suspect toxicants identified in Sediment C using standard WS-TIE methods.	116
Figure 4.8 Results from WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and Sediment D (■) using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, $n = 4$. * denotes a significant ($p < 0.05$) difference to baseline treatment.	119
Figure 4.9 Results from WS-TIE (II) study on control sediment (■) and Sediment D (■), including new treatments, using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, $n = 4$. * denotes a significant ($p < 0.05$) difference to baseline sediment.	121
Figure 4.10 Results from WS-TIE (III) confirmation study on control sediment (■) and Sediment D (■) using the 10-d toxicity to <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, $n = 4$. * denotes a significant ($p < 0.05$) difference to baseline sediment.	123
Figure 4.11 Suspect toxicants identified in Sediment D using (a) standard and (b) new WS-TIE methods.	124
Figure 4.12 Results from WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and Sediment E (■) using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, $n = 4$. No bars present for baseline and ZEO treatments of Sediment E due to 0% survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i>	125

Figure 4.13 Results from WS-TIE (II) study on control sediment (■) and Sediment E (■), including new treatments, using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. * denotes a significant (p<0.05) difference to baseline sediment.	128
Figure 4.14 Suspect toxicants identified in Sediment E using (a) standard and (b) new WS-TIE methods.	129
Figure 4.15 Results from WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and Sediment F (■), including new treatments, using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. * denotes a significant (p<0.05) difference to baseline sediment. No bars present for baseline and ZEO treatments of Sediment F due to 0% survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i>	132
Figure 4.16 Suspect toxicants identified in Sediment F using (a) standard and (b) new WS-TIE methods.	133
Figure 4.17 Results from WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and Sediment G (■), including new MEC treatments, using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. * denotes a significant (p<0.05) difference to baseline sediment.	135
Figure 4.18 Results from WS-TIE (I) study on control sediment (■) and Sediment H (■), including new MEC treatments, using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. * denotes a significant (p<0.05) difference to baseline sediment.	139
Figure 4.19 Results from WS-TIE (II) study on control sediment (■) and Sediment H (■), including new treatments, using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. * denotes a significant (p<0.05) difference to baseline sediment. No bars present for MEC and MEC+F treatments of Sediment G due to 0% survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i>	140
Figure 4.20 Results from WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and Sediment I (■), including new treatments, using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4.	141
Figure 4.21 Results from WS-TIE (II) study on control sediment (■) and Sediment I (■), including new treatments, using the 10-d survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i> . Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. * denotes a significant (p<0.05) difference to baseline sediment. No bars present for MEC treatment of Sediment I due to 0% survival of <i>M. plumulosa</i>	142
Figure 4.22 Suspect toxicants identified with standard WS-TIE methods in (a) Sediments G, (b) H, and (c) I compared to toxicants identified by new WS-TIE methods in (d) Sediments G, (e) H, and (f) I.	144
Figure 4.23 Amphipod survival in control (un-contaminated sediments) MEC treatments containing 20 µm mesh (■) or 30 µm mesh base (■). Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4.	145
Figure 4.24 Toxicants identified in sediments using (a) standard and (b) new WS-TIE treatments.	162
Figure 5.1 Concentration-effects relationships for the 24-h esterase activity in <i>E. cf punctulata</i> to (dissolved zinc. Logistic (sigmoidal) curve is shown.	172
Figure 5.2 Esterase activity in <i>E. cf punctulata</i> vs (a) total PAHs (◆), Low-MW PAHs (■), High-MW PAHs (▲), and (b) TPHs, Error bars represent the standard deviations of four replicate toxicity tests.	175
Figure 5.3 Enzyme (esterase) activity (% of control) in <i>E. cf punctulata</i> after 24-h exposure to baseline sediment samples (un-treated) (■) and sediment-15% powdered coconut charcoal treatments (■). * indicates significant difference (p<0.05) relative to baseline sediments. Error bars represent the standard deviations of four replicate toxicity tests, n = 4. No bars indicate 0% enzyme activity.	177

- Figure 5.4** WS-TIE results from control (■) and Sediment K (■) using esterase activity in *E. cf punctulata* as a toxicity biomarker. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits n = 4. * denotes a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) difference to control treatment. 179
- Figure 5.5** Results from a WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and sediment spiked with 800 mg Cu/kg (■) using esterase activity in *E. cf punctulata* as a toxicity biomarker. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits n = 4. * denotes a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) difference to control treatment. 180
- Figure 5.6** Results from a WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and sediment spiked with 500 mg Cu/kg (■) using esterase activity in *E. cf punctulata* as a toxicity biomarker. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. * denotes a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) difference to control treatment. 181
- Figure 5.7** Results from a WS-TIE study on control sediment (■) and sediment spiked with 750g Cu/kg (■) using esterase activity in *E. cf punctulata* as a toxicity biomarker. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits, n = 4. * denotes a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) difference to control treatment. 181
- Figure 6.1** The size of the amphipod *M. plumulosa* ranging from 5 ± 2 -d to 52 ± 4 -d old. Y error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits and X error bars represent the amphipod age range. Lowercase letters (a, b, c) denote a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod size between treatments. 197
- Figure 6.2** Effect of nutrition added to sand in the form of silt (0 to 95% w/w) on the 10-d survival (■-bar) and size (◇-line) of juvenile *M. plumulosa* in whole-sediment toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. Uppercase letters (A, B, C, D) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod survival between treatments. Lowercase letters (a, b, c) denote a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod size between treatments. 198
- Figure 6.3** Influence of (■) sediment particle size and (◇) total organic carbon (TOC) content in clean un-contaminated control sediments on amphipod size (mm^2). Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. 199
- Figure 6.4** Effect of feeding on the 10-d survival (■-bar) and size (◇-line) of juvenile *M. plumulosa* exposed to sand in whole-sediment toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. Uppercase letters (A, B, C, D) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod survival between treatments. Lowercase letters (a, b, c) denote a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod size between treatments. 201
- Figure 6.5** Effect of feeding on the 10-d survival and size of juvenile *M. plumulosa* exposed to Bonnet Bay, Grays Point and Boronia Park control sediments. BB= Bonnet Bay, GP= Grays Point and BP= Boronia Park. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. Upper case letters (A, B, C) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod survival between treatments. Lowercase letters (a, b, c) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod size between treatments. 202
- Figure 6.6** Effect of feeding on the 10-d survival and size of juvenile *M. plumulosa* exposed to old and new Bonnet Bay control sediment in whole-sediment toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. Upper case letters (A, B, C) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod survival between treatments. Lowercase letters (a, b, c) denote statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in amphipod size between treatments. 202
- Figure 6.7** The effect of CuS spiked-sediments on the 10-d survival (■-bar) and size (◇-line) of *M. plumulosa* in whole-sediment toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments. 204

- Figure 6.8** The effect of 10-d survival (■-bar) and size (□-line) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to CuS spiked-sediment toxicity tests, and the influence of food on the toxicity of CuS spiked-sediments on *M. plumulosa* survival (■-bar) and size (◇-line). Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments..... 206
- Figure 6.9** Effect of ammonia ($\text{NH}_3\text{-N}$ and NH_3) in ammonia spiked-sediments on the 10-d survival (■-bar) and size (□-line) of *M. plumulosa* in whole-sediment toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. Upper case letters (A, B, C, D) denote significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between sediments. Lower case letters (a) denote significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between sediments..... 207
- Figure 6.10** The 10-d survival (■-bar) and size (□-line) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to control sediments containing additions of CC of varying particle size. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between the control and sediment treatments. 208
- Figure 6.11** The 10-d survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to standard WS-TIE treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment A (■-bar, ◇-line). Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments. 210
- Figure 6.12** The 10-d survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to standard WS-TIE treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment B (■-bar, ◇-line). Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. 211
- Figure 6.13** The survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to standard WS-TIE (I) treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment D (■-bar, ◇-line) in 10-d toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments..... 213
- Figure 6.14** The survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to new WS-TIE (II) treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment D (■-bar, ◇-line) in 10-d toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments..... 213
- Figure 6.15** The survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to new WS-TIE (III) treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment D (■-bar, ◇-line) in 10-d toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. 214
- Figure 6.16** The survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to standard and new WS-TIE (II) treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment F (■-bar, ◇-line) in 10-d toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments..... 215
- Figure 6.17** The survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to standard and new WS-TIE treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment G (■-bar, ◇-line) in 10-d toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments..... 216

- Figure 6.18** The survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to standard and new WS-TIE treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment H (■-bar, ◇-line) in 10-d toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments. 218
- Figure 6.19** The survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to new WS-TIE (II) treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment H (■-bar, ◇-line) in 10-d toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments. 218
- Figure 6.20** The survival (bars) and size (lines) of *M. plumulosa* exposed to new WS-TIE (II) treatments of control sediments (■-bar, □-line) and Sediment I (■-bar, ◇-line) in 10-d toxicity tests. Error bars represent upper and lower 95% confidence limits. * denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod size between control and treatments. # denotes significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in amphipod survival between control and treatments. 219
- Figure 7.1** Schematic figure for undertaking WS-TIE studies with the amphipod *M. plumulosa*. ** denotes that toxicity is partially reduced; results from treatments performed simultaneously should be considered to account for toxicity. Continue on to treatments for particulate-associated contaminants if toxicity remains un-accounted. 239
- Figure 7.2** Schematic figure for undertaking WS-TIE studies with the alga *E. cf punctulata*. ** denotes that toxicity is partially reduced; results from treatments performed simultaneously should be considered to account for toxicity. Continue on to treatments for particulate-associated contaminants if toxicity remains un-accounted. 245

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Classes of chemicals removed or rendered biologically un-available by Phase I TIE manipulations.....	12
Table 2.1 Physico-chemical properties of the Bonnet Bay (BB), Grays Point (GP) and Boronia Park (BP) sediments (modified from Simpson <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Simpson and King, 2005).	38
Table 2.2 Detection limits of metals in filtered seawater (35‰) using inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrophotometry (ICP-AES, spectroflame EOP).	41
Table 2.3 Summary of test conditions for the 10-d acute whole-sediment toxicity test using the juvenile amphipod <i>M. plumulosa</i>	47
Table 2.4 Summary of test conditions for the <i>E. cf. punctulata</i> esterase inhibition whole-sediment toxicity test.	52
Table 3.1 Acute 10-d toxicity data for dissolved ammonia (mg/L) in whole-sediment toxicity tests using the juvenile amphipod <i>M. plumulosa</i>	67
Table 3.2 Acute 10-d toxicity data for dissolved zinc (µg/L) and 4-d toxicity data for ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) (mg/L) in water-only toxicity tests for the juvenile amphipod <i>M. plumulosa</i>	69
Table 3.3 Effect of the ZEO treatment on the 10-d toxicity of ammonia-spiked sediments to <i>M. plumulosa</i> , and the concentration of total (NH ₃ -N) and un-ionised (NH ₃) ammonia in the overlying and pore waters of sediment bioassays.	81
Table 4.1 Standard WS-TIE treatments and target contaminants/stressors.....	104
Table 4.2 New WS-TIE treatments and targeted toxicants and/or stressors.	104
Table 4.3 Physical and chemical properties for Sediment <i>A</i> ^d	107
Table 4.4 WS-TIE toxicity data for control sediments and Sediment <i>A</i> using the 10-d toxicity to <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival, and the effect of WS-TIE treatments on the dissolved metals in the overlying and pore waters ^d	109
Table 4.5 Physical and chemical properties for Sediment <i>B</i> ^b	111
Table 4.6 WS-TIE toxicity data for control sediments and Sediment <i>B</i> using the 10-d toxicity to <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival, and the effect of WS-TIE treatments on the dissolved metals in the overlying and pore water ^d	112
Table 4.7 Physical and chemical properties for Sediment <i>C</i> ^c	113
Table 4.8 WS-TIE toxicity data for control sediments and Sediment <i>C</i> using the 10-d toxicity to <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival, and the effect of WS-TIE treatments on the dissolved metals in the overlying and pore water ^d	115
Table 4.9 Physical and chemical properties for Sediment <i>D</i> ^a	117
Table 4.10 WS-TIE toxicity data for control sediments and Sediment <i>D</i> using the 10-d toxicity to <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival, and the effect of WS-TIE treatments on the dissolved metals in the overlying and pore water ^c	118
Table 4.11 Physical and chemical properties for Sediment <i>E</i>	124
Table 4.12 WS-TIE (I and II) toxicity data for control sediments and Sediment <i>E</i> using the 10-d toxicity to <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival, and the effect of WS-TIE treatments on the dissolved metals in the overlying and pore water ^d	126
Table 4.13 Physical and chemical properties for Sediment <i>F</i>	130
Table 4.14 WS-TIE toxicity data for control sediments and Sediment <i>F</i> using the 10-d toxicity to <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival, and the effect of standard and new WS-TIE treatments on the dissolved metals in the overlying and pore water ^d	131
Table 4.15 Physical and chemical properties for Sediments <i>G</i> , <i>H</i> , <i>I</i> ^a	136

Table 4.16 WS-TIE (I and II) toxicity data for control sediments and Sediments <i>G</i> , <i>H</i> and <i>I</i> using the 10-d toxicity to <i>M. plumulosa</i> survival, and the effect of WS-TIE treatments on the dissolved metals in the overlying and pore water ^d	137
Table 5.1 Toxicity of copper and zinc to esterase activity in <i>E. cf punctulata</i> in water-only exposures.....	172
Table 5.2 Effect of PCC (7.5%, 15% and 30%), MCR, MCRx, CAR and ZEO, on the 24-h toxicity to esterase activity in <i>E. cf punctulata</i> when added to control sediments.....	173
Table 5.3 Sediment properties and concentrations of major contaminants in Sediments <i>A - Y</i> , and bioassay effects data for the benthic microalga <i>E. cf punctulata</i>	176
Table 5.4 WS-TIE data for contaminated (<i>K</i>) and copper-spiked sediments using the 24-h <i>E. cf punctulata</i> enzyme toxicity test.	182

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AEM*: acid extractable metals
- CAR*: carbonaceous adsorbant resin
- CC*: coconut charcoal
- EDTA*: ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid
- FDA*: flouroscein diacetate
- GCC*: granular coconut charcoal
- HOC*: hydrophobic organic contaminant
- ISQG*: interim sediment quality guidelines
- LOEC*: lowest observed effect concentration
- MCR*: metals chelating resin
- MEC*: mesh exposure chambers
- NOEC*: no observed effect concentration
- PAC*: particulate-associated contaminants
- PAH*: polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon
- PCC*: powdered coconut charcoal
- TBT*: tributyl tin
- TIE*: toxicity odentification evaluation
- TOC*: total organic carbon
- TPM*: total particulate metals
- WS-TIE*: whole-sediment toxicity identification evaluation
- ZEO*: zeolite